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Starting with the Chair

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Abstract

My son is balancing on the edge of a rocking chair in the corner of my study with a thick red anthology of English Literature on his knee, and he is telling me that these sonnets of Shakespeare's are really very good, especially the satisfying couplets at the end. I am sitting at my desk, where I had been writing a letter until he knocked at the door, and am trying not to show my pleasure, for at his age my approval annoys him as much as he desires it.

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My son is balancing on the edge of a rocking chair in the corner of my study with a thick red anthology of English Literature on his knee, and he is telling me that these sonnets of Shakespeare's are really very good, especially the satisfying couplets at the end. I am sitting at my desk, where I had been writing a letter until he knocked at the door, and am trying not to show my pleasure, for at his age my approval annoys him as much as he desires it.

A small scene, infinitely expandable, endlessly rich in possibility. Lives ready to be unfurled from any point in the room, histories waiting to be explicated like unfolding Chinese boxes. Start anywhere.

Start with my son Oliver – his dark curls, so like his father's, falling down his forehead as he bends intently over the page, in love with English itself. He reads two sonnets aloud to prove how good they are, and he rolls the words around in his mouth as if they were large, sweet grapes. Those Italian ones, pale green and tasting of honey – we used to pick them from the vineyard ourselves the year we spent in Tuscany on Daniel's sabbatical. Oliver was only a toddler then.

Or the book from which he reads – my university text 25 years ago when I was studying English literature, believing absolutely that someday I would be a poet. A real poet. Along the margins of the pages are now-obscure references, silly drawings, brief but suggestive messages written to a young man who sat beside me in that first-year survey class. (His name, apparently, was Jeffrey.) From the look of these pages it is clear that I paid little attention to the text...my interest was not in someone else's poems but in my own.

Oliver at 16 shows much greater respect for what the past can offer, and he seems to have a genuine love of the printed word – but his real concern lies elsewhere: he wants to be a doctor, he says. A psychiatrist. That's probably the result of his seeing one – only a therapist, really, but we decided it was essential during these last few months since Daniel and I finally divorced. Oliver has transferred most of his affection and filial allegiance to the doctor, who explains to Daniel and me that this is a necessary process he must go through to heal his legitimate hurt and anger at having his life disrupted. I feel wounded by 'legitimate' as if he too is subtly blaming us... But in fact, he is a kindly man, and only wants

to see our son through this difficult time as well as he can. It will pass, the doctor promises. All things shall pass.

Or the room in which we sit – where, outside the window, several enormous clumps of lavender are falling over themselves with fragrant blossoms: but the latch on the window is closed and we cannot catch the scent. We can only imagine it, as we do as soon as we so much as think the word lavender. Which comes first to mind, Oliver and I asked each other over supper last week, the colour of lavender or the smell? We could not agree, but it took us through the breaded turkey right past salad to dessert. It is hard, sometimes, to find a topic of conversation to keep us from staring at our plates as we eat in silence, both of us deep in our dark and private thoughts. Neither of us speaks of missing Daniel but we are aware of his absence, there is still hurt radiating from the void where he was. We are an amputated family suffering phantom pain.

Or the desk at which I am seated, its surface cluttered with papers and small objects, each one able to transform moment into memory. These things I carry from place to place, talismans against my own oblivion – the empty enamelled box, the Ojibway sweet-grass basket full of shells and calling cards, or the small clay god, mouth puckered in a round O as if ready to whistle, whose eternal task it is to banish depression. (So Daniel was told by an old lady in a Guatemalan market from whom he also bought a jade pendant to ward against indigestion; the stone left green marks on my clothes when I wore it on a chain around my neck.)

Or the rocking chair on which my son sits. Yes, I like the idea of a chair as means of transportation and of entry. The chair as engine, the chair as door, the chair as key. Start with this chair...

The padded seat is covered with floral needlepoint, giving the chair a more elegant appearance than it had when first I got it from my mother's sister, Auntie Glad. Its covering then had been drab fabric in a geometric design unsuitable for an old-fashioned chair. It was obviously a scrap of material brought home by Gladys from the textile factory where she used to buy remnants for next to nothing. Her house filled itself over the years with homemade pillows and slip covers and curtains in odd patterns and clashing colours: nothing matched, and that was as she liked it. She was an expansive, happy woman who took delight in a motley life – the unforeseen pleasures, the unexpected bargains.

My aunt kept the old chair in her home for more than two decades because, although it had been left to my mother in my grandmother's will, it was not allowed in our house by my father, who detested rocking chairs. It was old, so old it was possibly valuable, but no one knew exactly from where it had come or where it had been made – there was some talk it'd been brought over from Britain but I think more likely it was from one of those small towns in Ontario where you see empty furniture factories nowadays. It had belonged to my great-grandmother who died on the family farm near Belleville at the beginning of this century and

that, rather than its status as an antique, gave the chair legendary rank in our genealogy: the matriarch who founded our Canadian line had died in its arms.

The chair is big, with such a wide berth it takes up a lot of room as it rocks: my father's major argument against it was always its size whenever the subject came up. Which it didn't often, since my mother always favoured harmony over strife, and allowed as how it was far more sensible to keep the chair at Glad's (who lived only an hour away) where she could sit in it from time to time. In her eyes, there had been a nice compromise: in mine, the chair always meant my father had won and she had lost.

My mother remembered spending happy hours as a child curled on the padded seat, which was large enough for her to pull her legs up underneath as she read. Whenever she described this scene, she portrayed herself with a novel in one hand and an apple in the other. It was a picture which intrigued me, because it seemed as if my mother was Jo in Little Women, who was, of course, who I wanted to be. It was curiously unsettling to have both Jo and my mother in mind at once.

Although the chair is sufficiently broad for a child's body to sprawl comfortably, no adult locked within its encasing arms can do anything but sit very straight against its firm back. Slouching and slumping are out of the question. Which is how the chair tells us about the character of the Welsh-born lady who died in it: she must have had her spine rigid against the wooden back even as she drew her last breath, for when they found her she was sitting with hands folded in her lap, as stiffly upright in death as she'd been in life.

Actually, it wasn't 'they' who found her, it was Janet, the young hired girl she'd employed only that spring (my great-grandmother died in November). Janet came from a Scottish family on a neighbouring farm down the concession, and had taken good care of the old woman all through the summer, quietly watching her stubborn grasp on life weaken. Janet never let on what she thought to any of her employer's children or grandchildren when they came to visit – that soon she'd be out of a job.

The day my great-grandmother passed on had been a busy one for Janet, baking raisin bread and lemon pie and two kinds of cake to serve when Norma Walpole, wife of the Methodist minister, came to spend her regular Tuesday afternoon 'keeping company'. Mrs. Walpole was a good-hearted, stout soul who liked a little something with her tea, and Janet always obliged. That day the Reverend's wife had spent her hours in sociable silence, as the elderly are wont to do, sitting by the parlour wood stove and crocheting a little. Simply being present.

Janet saw Mrs. Walpole to the front door just as the clock in the hall struck five, and after clearing the tea-things she'd come into the room to stoke up the waning fire in the stove. Then had pulled the heavy drapes against the night, noting there was a thin line of cold blue light still on the

horizon: it made her think of all the months of winter darkness yet ahead, she said.

After she'd done that, still chattering (as she did continually to fill the still rooms with the sound of a voice), she'd gone over to arrange a woollen shawl around those frail and ailing shoulders. It was normal for my great-grandmother to sit wordlessly, dreaming by the fire, and so that didn't trouble Janet, she kept on talking as always: it was only when her hand brushed the silent woman's wrinkled neck that she cried out in fright, for the feel of the skin was like ice.

Janet was inconsolable, blaming herself for not being with her mistress at the moment of departure from this world, for having let her die alone in the room. 'All alone, with never another soul to see her out.' She wept and howled and it seemed would never be comforted: luckily, my great-uncle Howard, still single at forty and youngest of the deceased's five living children, arrived late that night from town where he was a senior partner in a small law firm, and took it upon himself to offer solace to Janet in the pantry while the rest of the family were organizing things in the parlour.

When, some months later, it became evident that Uncle Howard's charitable efforts would bear fruit, he and young Janet were married by Reverend Walpole and Janet became my mother's favourite aunt. I remember her as a very old lady, speckled all over like a wild bird's egg, and with a sharp little face which always looked slightly injured and put-out. She was not well-educated and in a family such as ours where pride was taken in academic accomplishments – it was how one left the farm, after all – poor Janet was forever scorned and until her dying day referred to, behind her back, as 'the help'. Howard progressed in life in spite of Janet, his sisters and brothers and their children all said, and only my mother liked her and stuck up for her and claimed that it was entirely on her account that he eventually became a judge.

It was from Janet that the story about the chair originally came, and it may have been because of fondness for her aunt that my mother felt such strong sentiment about a piece of furniture. She would tell and retell Janet's tale as if it were her own, as it were she herself who had found her dead grandmother. My mother's mother – Howard's sister – had been left the chair because she was the eldest of the five, and when she died, they found she'd written on a slip of paper, stuck in the corner of her dressing table mirror, that her daughter Gwen was to have 'the old padded rocker'.

And then my mother Gwen died, unexpectedly and far too young, and Auntie Glad said to me at her funeral, 'Now child, you're the eldest, you'll have her chair.' No longer a child – I'd been married for two years and was pregnant with Oliver at the time – I couldn't think for a moment what she meant until she made the movement of rocking back and forth. 'It'll be a grand place to suckle the baby,' she added, looking pointedly at my rounded abdomen. 'That straight back'll give you good support, and

the arms are the right height too, mark my words. You and that husband of yours come and get it soon as you can.'

Unlike my father, Daniel is a man of loosely held opinion, letting notions run carelessly through his life like glass beads through an Arab trader's fingers. If I liked the big chair and wanted it in our house, it was all the same to him...personally, he thought it grotesque, he said, but maybe a change of covering would help.

Life was always like that with Daniel during our years of marriage: his slight removal from, and disavowal of, whatever I liked or wanted, but passive acceptance. Yes, have it, by all means. I'd never prevent you, what sort of guy do you think I am, anyway? Easy-going laughter, acquiescence, and what I believed for too many years must be love.

Of course I did nurse Oliver in the chair, for Gladys had been correct, the enclosure of the back and arms provided a firm frame within which to experience that new, strange sensation of his tiny sweet mouth pulling fiercely at my nipple. Sometimes it would be so sharp I'd feel as if my entire body were about to splinter itself around the room, and it was only the old chair holding me together that prevented me from flying apart. From the joy of motherhood or from the pain? Who knows.

Oliver is our only child, Daniel's and mine. I feel as if I have let my mother's family down by not having a daughter to whom to pass the chair, and I am glad that big jolly Aunt Glad and little freckled Great-Aunt Janet are dead and gone so that they don't have to know our line is dwindling out. Of course, neither of them would ever have said a word to make me feel bad, but they would have felt quietly sad. I know it, and I still grieve on their account as well as mine.

But the way things have turned out, it's been better having only one kid to call himself – ruefully, and with some humour – the 'product of a broken home'. Oliver divides his heart evenly between us, us and the doctor, that is. I understand – I've been to a therapist too, although not the same one. It was a few years ago, around the time Daniel brought back the small clay god, hoping with that gesture to make me smile, to force me to forgive him for having gone to Guatemala in the first place.

We both acted as if what had happened was a quarrel over principles – I disagreed with his doing business in that country and he, typically, said that his deals (importing native crafts to Toronto) were nothing to do with politics. As if money could change hands in Guatemala in the 1980s without that being a political act! In truth, I had been increasingly depressed about how little we understood each other well before his trip, and I found myself sinking deeper into gloom with each new event which proved me right.

But the clay god did make me laugh, and I was genuinely touched by his wanting me to feel better, to be myself again: I would sit in the old rocking chair, enclosed and safe, trying to remember how we had fallen in love, hoping that if I could figure that out we could manage to keep on

going. I wanted to stay married at the same time as I was clearly, and increasingly, miserable. When I was feeling especially low, I would think of my great-grandmother, wishing that I too could simply give up the ghost as I rocked. Nothing overtly suicidal, you understand, just that total giving up which is deeper than apathy, worse than anger. And which eventually passed.

Oliver and I have lived here without Daniel since last year and the new arrangement suits me well: I am nearly finished the book of poems I began years ago, and with luck it will be published later this fall. My contract is with a small regional press, never going to make me famous but at least respectable, acceptable, a real poet after all this time... Naturally, being a perfectionist, I am still fine-tuning some of the poems and it's an interminable process, for I am always capable of finding another word to alter or remove.

The problem is usually Daniel – not his direct interference of course, or even his name, but a word here or a phrase there which evokes his face, the sound of his voice, the way he would lean back when he was listening which meant he wasn't really listening at all. The intensity of his pale blue eyes seems to crop up everywhere: in one poem the sky, in another (about a young girl running away from home), the colour of a passing car. Somehow, his physical presence makes its way unbidden into all my poetry... No matter that I want these poems to be pure, or believe myself to be creating them from language undefiled by remembrance, I find Daniel emerging and taking over.

You see here, for example. All sources flow to the same end as all rivers run into the sea. No matter which object in the room I might have chosen, I have only one story to tell and there is only one end to the story.

One day our marriage came apart as Daniel, sitting on the edge of the bed pulling on his socks, said that I must believe it was nothing personal, but it was finished. It, whatever it had been that was us. 'Honestly, nothing personal,' he said again. I was stricken, not with shock or sadness, but with rage – rage at myself for having tried too long to stay in love with him, and rage that it was Daniel, ever the slippery prevaricator, the laid-back procrastinator, Daniel who had dared first to speak the truth.

My son leans back now in the rocking chair with a sigh of deep satisfaction, having read the last two lines of Sonnet 30. The chair makes a gaspy, creaking sound and then the room is suddenly very still, as if every object in it had drawn breath, and I look down at the letter (an impersonal letter dealing with a forgotten insurance policy) I've been writing to Daniel, and tears come to my eyes. Oliver will be entirely fed up if he thinks his recitation has made me emotional, and so I keep my head down for a long time, as if contemplating Shakespeare's genius. My inky words before me on the ivory-coloured paper swim and blur, and I pull myself together only by thinking of the old rocking chair, which leads me to plucky little Janet, her back firmly wedged against the corner of the

pantry shelf, lifting her skirts for Howard. A spunky survivor, that Janet. There's a lesson there.

Oliver rises from the chair, and closes the old red textbook with a snap. 'What would have happened if you'd gone off with this Jeffrey?' he says, and in his awkward, adolescent way puts his hand on my hair in a comradely pat. 'This person you wrote notes to in the margins,' he adds.

'Ah, he was never a serious candidate,' I say, raising my head again and ready to banter in the way we've developed between us these past months. 'He was only marginal, Oliver.'

But nothing is marginal, is it? Not the book nor the old rocking chair, nor the letter to the father of my son, nor the sound of sonnets being read aloud as the sun is streaming through the window. Nor the lavender outside, strung all over with bees. It is all history, and it is all here in every present moment.

There is nothing in our lives that doesn't fit.